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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RANGOON 000979

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SUBJECT: BURMA: THAN SHWE HEALTH ISSUES FUEL POWER STRUGGLE
RUMORS

REF: RANGOON 973

Classified By: CDA Karl Stoltz for Reasons 1.4 (b,d)

1. (C) Summary: Heightened activity on August 23-24 at a Rangoon military hospital, including visits by senior-level officials, are the source of rumors that the leader of Burma's military regime, Senior General Than Shwe, has fallen seriously ill. It is possible that Than Shwe checked into the hospital for unknown medical reasons, but reliable information on his health is unavailable. Related rumors of a power struggle between Than Shwe and the regime's number two, Maung Aye, fueled by reports from Thailand-based exiles, appear to be baseless. Rangoon is quiet and official state media indicates that, as of COB August 24, it is business as usual for the regime. If Than Shwe has suffered a medical setback of any nature, it does not appear to have had any immediate impact on the regime's hierarchy or command and control capabilities. End Summary.

EYES ON THE OLD MAN

2. (C) The denizens of Rangoon, always quick to fill a regime-perpetuated news vacuum with rumors about Burma's reclusive top generals, are buzzing on August 24 over speculation that Than Shwe, Chairman of Burma's State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) military regime, has fallen seriously ill. There are no hard facts available as of COB to ascertain the veracity of this latest rumor. Embassy personnel, however, have over the past 24 hours witnessed a heightened level of activity at Rangoon's military hospital No. 2, including several motorcades ferrying senior-level military and government officials in and out of the hospital compound.

3. (C) The unusual activity at the military hospital, located near downtown Rangoon, appears to be the source of rumors that Senior General Than Shwe has suffered a stroke or is otherwise incapacitated. Eyewitnesses in the vicinity of the hospital claim that Than Shwe made a visit on the evening of August 23, but did not stay overnight, and returned the morning of August 24 to spend the day. Embassy sources at the hospital suggested that recurring back problems may explain the senior general's hospital visits, but the sources are unable or unwilling to provide more information, while other sources claim that his medical condition is more serious.

4. (C) Burmese government and military officials appear to have adhered to their regular schedules on August 24, including public appearances. We have heard no reports of meeting cancellations or other significant signs that would indicate a disruption in the regime's chain of command. Several cabinet-level officials, however, may have visited the military hospital, along with Than Shwe family members.

THE EXILES WEIGH IN

5. (C) During the afternoon of August 23, a spate of local rumors, which appear to have been fueled by reports from Thailand-based Burmese exiles, suggested that a power struggle had emerged between Than Shwe and SPDC Vice Chairman Maung Aye. One such report claimed that Maung Aye had ordered the arrest of Than Shwe during the latter's alleged personal visit to Rakhine State on the Bangladesh border, while another suggested the opposite scenario, that Than Shwe had forced the retirement of Maung Aye.

6. (C) Embassy military and airport contacts have affirmed that both generals are in Rangoon and have no immediate travel plans. Official state newspapers and radio and television broadcasts indicate regime business as usual, including notice that Than Shwe had sent a message of "felicitations," dated August 24, to President Yushchenko on the occasion of Ukrainian Independence Day. The regime has also given routine, broad coverage of Vice Senior General Maung Aye's hail and farewell meeting with the incoming and outgoing Russian Defense Attaches, which took place mid-day on August 23 and included the participation of several senior military officials.

COMMENT: THE BEAT GOES ON

7. (C) Senior General Than Shwe's most recent appearance in the state press was four days ago in coverage of his August

19 meeting with visiting UN envoy Ali Alatas (reftel). The 73-year old regime chief, however, frequently disappears from public view, especially in recent years. Prior to the Alatas visit, his most recent public appearance was on August 9, when he received credentials from the Spanish and German Ambassadors. Both Ambassadors reported to us that Than Shwe appeared to be in good physical and mental condition at that time.

18. (C) If Than Shwe has indeed suffered a medical setback, it does not appear to have had any immediate impact on the regime's hierarchy or command and control capabilities. Local residents are, naturally, intensely following the fate of the SPDC's twelve ruling generals, especially the top two. As of COB August 24, however, Rangoon is quiet and, hospital activity and associated rumors aside, there are no signs of any significant disruption.
Stoltz